



– A Technical Brief for Breakthrough ACTION Field Teams –

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO DISSEMINATE COVID-19 INFORMATION

May 14, 2020

This technical brief details the steps and considerations programs can take to develop an overarching social media strategy to disseminate COVID-19 messages and combat misinformation. This document also provides a list of relevant tools and resources for implementation.

This fact sheet was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Breakthrough ACTION and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

What is social media?

Social media are applications or websites that allow users to connect in a virtual network or community, facilitating an unprecedented “reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and performance” of shared information or content (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2015). This technical brief refers to major social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp); however, what is available and most popular will vary by country.

How can social media be used effectively?

Social media can be used to [collect and address rumors](#) or popular beliefs among target audiences, share evidence-based and timely health information, receive instant feedback on materials, conduct remote trainings, promote awareness of a project, its mission and events, and more. As increased numbers of people search online for health information, social media platforms are leading the lightning-speed spread of both dangerous coronavirus misinformation and the correct life-saving measures individuals, families, and communities can take to reduce their risk. Public health programs must have a proactive presence in these information-sharing spaces to provide access to trusted and accurate information.

Other Important Terms

Social media strategy: A detailed social media plan for disseminating content.

Platform: A social media site or network (e.g., Facebook, YouTube).

Content: Created or curated information that can take the form of text, photo, video, graphics, and more.

Users: Active social media accounts for individuals and organizations. This may include individuals with multiple accounts or bots (automated accounts that mimic human users).

Interactions: The ways in which a user engages with social media content. This will not always be measurable (e.g., a person sharing a post via private message).

Metrics report: A document exhibiting measured progress across all owned accounts. This is sometimes called analytics and may include link tracking.

Editorial or content calendar: A forward-looking timeline that details the content prepared for posts, campaigns, events, or observances.

The Social Media Strategy Checklist

A social media strategy should strive to be realistic, consistent, targeted, and have measurable goals. A successful social media strategy relies on analyzing existing accounts, identifying a target audience, defining goals, selecting a platform, determining resources available for implementing the strategy, assigning team member roles, and creating a content calendar.

The social media strategy development checklist assumes teams do not have a strategy in place. If a team has an existing strategy or prior experience, this checklist can help fine-tune processes and approaches. Additional detail and resources for each item in the checklist follow.

Steps to develop a social media strategy

- Analyze two or three existing accounts sharing health or COVID-19 information in your country, region, or community.
- Identify target audience(s) using messages from the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Technical Working Group, other government agencies, or other working groups.
- Research social media users in your country, region, or community to understand when and how target audiences use social media.
- Identify the platforms that best fit your target audience(s).
- Define goals and articulate what success will look like.
- Take stock of the resources—time, money, staff—available to maintain a social media presence.
- Think through the team’s relevant skills to determine roles and responsibilities.
- Select the software or third-party programs the team will use to carry out this strategy—from scheduling posts to generating metrics reports.
- Create a timeline or calendar that gives each person enough time to fulfill their role.

The Social Media Strategy Checklist:

Additional detail



Analyze existing accounts








Ministries of Health, prominent non-governmental organizations, public officials, and news organizations typically have a social media presence and use it to share important health information. Analyzing these accounts can give a better picture of how others are using social media in a local context, who is interacting with their content, and how they are presenting information. To guide your strategy, take notes on what could be strengthened and what posts garnered more engagement. Analyze how audiences interact with those accounts and platforms to help strengthen the content and increase user engagement. Continue to follow the accounts to see how they respond to certain events; this may help you create content.



Use your target audience to select the right platform(s)

RCCE Technical Working Groups and other multi-sectoral bodies leading the COVID-19 response have strategies that identify priority audiences for each country. To determine which social media platform will be most effective with each priority audience, compare audience demographics with the demographics of each social media platform. The right social media platform will vary by audience and by country.

Social Media Platforms At-A-Glance:

Platform	Type of Content	Largest Demographic	Global Audience
 Facebook	Text, photo, video, links, images, animated graphics	25–34 years old	2.3 billion
 Twitter	Text, photo, images, animated graphics	25–34 years old	330 million
 YouTube	Video, animated graphics	15–25 years old	2 billion
 WhatsApp	Text, photo, images, video, links, animated graphics, attachments	United States: 26–35 year sold	1.6 billion
 LinkedIn	Text, photo, images, links	25–30 years old	310 million
 Instagram	Photo, video, images	25–30 years old	1 billion
 Pinterest	Photo, images, animated graphics	United States: 30–49 years old	265 million

The Social Media Strategy Checklist: Additional detail (Continued)

Free resources for demographic and country-specific research

- Facebook audience research: [Facebook Audience Insights](#)
- Demographic research by country: [NapoleonCat](#)
- Platform use by country: [StatCounter](#)
- Successful pages by country: [SocialBakers](#)



Defining success

To build a social media account that is a credible source of COVID-19 information, consider setting specific and measurable goals. For example, providing real-time updates on governmental COVID-19 policy or responding to comments or questions with official guidance within 24 hours. If you want to dispel rumors or misinformation, specific goals could include identifying three rumors spreading online in a given country or creating content that dispels three rumors a week.

Most platforms give you access to metrics that will track your number of [followers, reach, impressions, and engagement](#), but keep in mind that not all of these metrics are equal. Generally speaking, the more difficult or time-consuming the type of interaction is (i.e., follow, like, share, comment, click), the more valuable the interaction. This means that, contrary to popular belief, the number of followers is not necessarily the best measure of success. For example, the engagement rate will give you a better idea of how content is resonating with an audience. Or, clicks may be more valuable than likes when sharing an article.

The Social Media Strategy Checklist:

Additional detail (Continued)



Determining roles

Team member roles should be clearly defined. If the role cannot be filled with existing staff members, consider an external consultant. Social media team roles include the following:

Content creator: This team member demonstrates a strong understanding of the appropriate language and messaging needed. Ideally, the person has experience writing for social media (e.g., messages that are short and jargon-free). The content creator is in charge of:

- Ensuring that an editorial calendar is completed in time for an Approver to review.
- Scheduling posts.
- Monitoring all accounts for questions and flagging concerns.
- Soliciting content from other team members (e.g., photo, video, graphics).

Approver: This team member may be someone from the Ministry of Health, a technical working group member, USAID or other donor representative, or someone on a project team. Approvers are responsible for:

- Reviewing all posts prior to being published.
- Providing feedback to the Content Creator.
- Receiving and reviewing weekly metrics reports.

Implementer: The most important aspect of maintaining a consistent social media presence is ensuring that at least one individual is in charge of carrying out the strategy. Typically, Approvers serve in this capacity; however, given the time commitment required to move a strategy forward, the Approver and

Implementer roles should be kept separate. An Implementer is in charge of:

- Ensuring the approval process is carried out fully.
- Monitoring all accounts for questions, comments, and concerns and responding or delegating responses to other team members.
- Delivering weekly and monthly metrics reports to the Approver and Content Creator.

Optional roles:

- **Disseminator:** This role may be combined with the Implementer or may be a separate team member. The Disseminator is responsible for sharing social media activity with an offline network or wireless access gateway or coordinating with community influencers.
- **Graphic designer:** This role requires experience in converting written posts into images that are attractive and easy to understand. This skill is particularly important when reaching audiences with low literacy rates.
- **Photographer:** This team member takes high-quality images of the work being done to accompany posts or messages developed by the Content Creator.
- **Videographer:** This person films and edits short videos to help re-purpose posts or messages developed by the Content Creator.

The Social Media Strategy Checklist:

Additional detail (Continued)



Analyzing sentiment and social listening

Social listening is a tool that gives insight into how and why people are talking about a particular topic. For example, is the sentiment for the word “coronavirus” negative? What other phrases or terms are often mentioned in conjunction with “coronavirus”? Social listening is useful for prioritizing messages, tracking rumors, and fine-tuning content creation. Be aware that social listening tools rely heavily on publicly-accessible social media content rather than private content and can, therefore, skew perceptions of online conversations.

Social media platform management software such as [Sprout](#) and [Hootsuite](#) provide access to social listening tools. To conduct social listening for a short period of time or if a subscription to a social media management program is not available, try using free trials or monthly subscriptions to programs like [Awario](#).



Generating metrics reports

[Metrics reports](#) are documents sent weekly or monthly that detail the performance of social media content across all platforms. In addition to presenting current data, these reports analyze which content has been successful and which has not. The methods used to collect and compare performance metrics will vary based on available resources in a particular country. See the Resources Matrix below for options.

The metrics offered within each social media platform (sometimes called native analytics), can be limited because they do not allow comparisons of overall performance across various platforms. Since each platform calculates metrics differently, cross-platform comparisons are difficult and time-intensive. The most common metric across all platforms is either impressions or reach. These two metrics will likely be the largest numbers of all forms of engagement because they encompass likes, retweets, shares, comments, and more.

The data presented in your metrics reports will depend on the software you use to track your social media metrics. The native analytics or Insights dashboard may include reach, engagements, followers, and likes but will likely be constrained to a set period of time (e.g., Facebook will not let you review overall page data older than 28 days). Paid services provide access to more valuable insights—usually impressions, engagement rate, volume, and sentiment—and have the ability to compare unique time periods (e.g., a Facebook campaign that ran for three weeks in June 2019). Sprout Social provides a good explanation of [social media metrics and how they differ](#).

The Social Media Strategy Checklist:

Additional detail (Continued)



Generating metrics reports (continued)

To get the most out of the metrics provided by each platform, export all of the data as an Excel sheet. On Facebook and Twitter, this opens up the amount of data available.

- To export data on Facebook:** Navigate to your organization’s Facebook page, select More in the top navigation bar, then select Insights. You will be taken to the Overview page where you will see the Export Data option in the top right-hand side. Choose from the following options: (1) page, post, and video data; (2) file format; (3) date range; and (4) layout. Facebook provides an overwhelming amount of data. We recommend downloading the data by post and focusing on the Lifetime Engaged Users column within the Key Metrics tab. This will generate a spreadsheet on the total number of unique users engaged and allows you to identify the most engaging content.
- To export data on Twitter:** Go to <https://analytics.twitter.com/> while logged into your organization’s account. Next to the Home button, select Tweets. To the right of the Tweet Activity headline, select Export Data. Choose whether you would like the data sorted by day or by tweet. This spreadsheet will give you access to detailed interactions (media clicks, hashtag clicks, detail expands, and more).

Metrics Resources Matrix:

Platform	Low-cost	Mid-cost	High-cost
Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Hootsuite Buffer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprout Agora Social bakers
Twitter	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Hootsuite Buffer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprout Agora Social bakers
YouTube	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Hootsuite 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Agora Social bakers
WhatsApp	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Limited analytics * Guide Google 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bit.ly 	N/A
LinkedIn	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Hootsuite 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprout Agora Social bakers
Instagram	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Hootsuite Buffer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprout Agora Social bakers
Pinterest	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Native analytics Guide Google Analytics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> e-Clincher Tailwind 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprout Social bakers

* business account required

Using Paid Advertisements

To reach your target audience, consider setting aside a budget each week or month to promote critically important content through paid advertisements, or ads. On Facebook, a paid ads strategy is carried out by either [boosting posts or using Facebook Ads Manager](#). The differences between the two are explained [here](#). Facebook Ads Manager has valuable tools to reach specific demographics (age, gender, city, language, religion, interest). Specific guidance on [creating these ads](#) or [boosting posts](#) is available.

You can use paid ads to promote messages, [rapidly test messages](#), and [optimize and update](#) the media accompanying those messages. Keep in mind that the best-performing ads are created with the target audience in mind so it is important to think critically during each step of [the ad creation process](#).

If your team is already managing a social media account or accounts, **build on what they are already doing**. Use the Social Media Strategy Checklist to ensure you have clearly defined your audience and goals and find areas that you may be able to improve. For example, you may be checking your Facebook page’s Insights tab but you are not generating metrics reports.

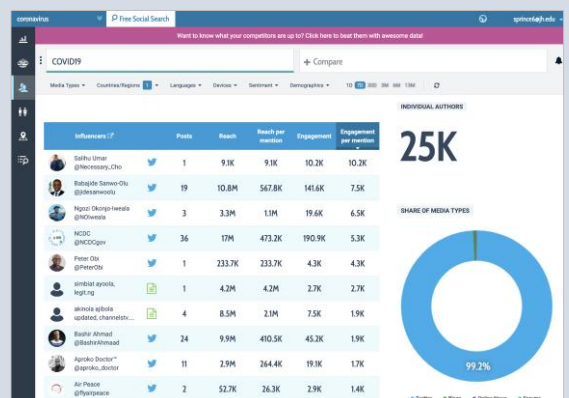
Utilizing user-generated content, or content created and published by unpaid contributors, is a very effective way to reach new users in your target audience, bolster trust in your account, and create a new bank of content to use. The [WHO #SafeHands Challenge](#) and the [ALS Ice Bucket Challenge](#) are good examples of promoting user-generated content.

Identify and/or collaborate with local influencers to reach their audiences, grow your following, and build your credibility by working with individuals trusted within a community. One way to identify local influencers is to use [Talkwalker](#). This platform will search all publicly-available social media content and can be tailored by country, language, age, gender, and more.

If there are no appropriate individuals with a social media following, consider working with community leaders. Although community leaders might not have a social media presence, it is still a useful way to build credibility and increase engagement.

Best Practices

- Build on what your team is already doing
- Utilize user-generated content
- Identify and/or collaborate with influencers
- Be social
- Research appropriate hashtags
- Leverage URL or link tracking



Talkwalker search result for COVID-19 filtered by influencers in Nigeria for users ages 18–25.

Using Paid Advertisements (Continued)

Be social! Tag organizations, government agencies such as the Ministry of Health, or individuals. For example, if you share a video with a doctor discussing COVID-19, check to see if they have an account. If so, tag them. This increases the likelihood that they will see and share your post, which helps increase the reach of your message. However, be mindful of how many accounts you tag and how you tag them. Avoid tagging multiple accounts at the end of a post as this can be seen as spam and negatively impact engagement. First, write your post, then find ways to naturally tag individuals and their organizations. For example:



Research appropriate hashtags. Search your chosen platform to see what [hashtags](#) are being used to talk about a particular subject. For instance, a quick [Twitter search](#) on the hashtag #coronavirus in early April 2020 revealed that it was primarily being used by organizations and news outlets while the hashtag #COVID19 was being used by individuals.

If your post includes a link, **URL or link tracking** can provide deeper insight into how users are engaging with content (e.g., pageviews per visit, average time on site, % new visitors, bounce rate). Consider using [Google's free URL builder](#) or [bit.ly](#). Link tracking is especially helpful when using WhatsApp due to the private nature of the app.

CCP Resource Persons

- [Sloane Prince](#)
- [Anne Kott](#)
- [Marla Shaivitz](#)

Online Resources

- [Sample Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria COVID-19 Social Media Strategy](#)
- [Using Social Media Platforms to Amplify Public Health Messages](#)
- [How to Use Social Media to Better Engage People Affected by Crises](#)
- [CERC, Social Media, and Mobile Devices \(chapter 9\)](#)
- [Best Practices: Facebook Guidelines](#)
- [COVID-19 Social Listening Global Report \(April 10, 2020\)](#)

Cover photo credit:

KC Nwakalor for USAID, Digital Development Communications. Nigeria: the WeMUNIZE program uses a combination of digital record keeping and community engagement to increase early childhood immunizations and was one of five winners of the USAID 2018 Digital Development Awards. June 25, 2019. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/121302193@N07/48128313928/in/photostream/>